

What is security culture?

The new ethos of risk

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Introduction

We live in an era of a tidal shift in international relations. We see and feel a need to re-tool our research gaze for wide-ranging changes in political, social and legal research, in particular concerning our way of understanding danger, threat and security. One of these changes involves the rise of the *pre-emptive impulse*, legitimated and institutionalized by Bush II. In presenting the new National Security Strategy one year after 11 September 2001, George W. Bush used the following words.

If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path to action (Bush, 2002)

This claim invites to many moral and political judgments. It originates in a relatively new set of circumstances. *First*, it arises a certain acceleration of political actions in time. The flow of information, people and things through global channels has increased the need to act *fast*. *Second*, it flows from a kind of *compression of space*. As a corollary to the acceleration of time, space has become more compact. What is far away is more intensely present. Spatial borders and limitations play less a role than before. As a result of these two absolutely fundamental changes, the notion of politics itself is put into a different light. The acceleration of time, the compression of space, put a new pressure on politics, a normative pressure, a need to act, to be accountable *now*. It forms what Brian Massumi has called “potential politics” (Massumi, 2007).¹ And it is the basis for what is sometimes called a new “security culture”.

Security culture (likes its cousin, strategic culture) has occurred as a concept every since the post-World War II appearance of the concept of security writ large. And yet the changing scope and

¹ There are distinct ties to both the doctrine of pre-emption with its roots in the Theory of Just War as well as in the changing use of the Precautionary Principle in the field of risk management.

reach of the concept of security, and a distinct evolution in the understanding of the culture which envelopes it, has left us with and inadequately thematized and thereby frequently abused concept.

Not all concepts are equal of course. And “security” today is without doubt a master-concept, occupying the lexical, semantic, political and ethical centre of any proposition containing it. It is an arche-signifier, a black hole of reference, bending the light rays of all meanings the might pass close to, absorbing and contorting meaning, and finally making itself the absolute signifier of all signification.

For this reason “security culture” is inevitably cast as a certain *kind* of security. “Culture” is understood as a modifier or determinate variation on the monolith term “security”. It is a modality for understanding security in, a means or mode of doing security.

In what follows I want to argue that we are experiencing a destabilization of “security culture” that is at once subversive and political and ethical constructive. I will claim that security culture is being changed by not only in changes in the *culture of security*, but also in a disruption of the security of culture. By opening this *double genitive* reading of security I will try to situate the question of security in the tension between objective and subjective security. The implicit normative of the argument then double: Let us look to culture to understand security, but also let us look to security and insecurity to understand culture.

We start by clarifying where we stand on the key concepts of this argument: security and culture.

Clarifying concepts I: culture

Culture as a concept emerges primarily in the historical conjuncture that produces the scientific field of anthropology (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2001; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

Two important *crises* mark the birth and evolution of the study of culture.

The first involves the early modern explosion into self-awareness of the eschatological world-view of human beings. What remained of the notion of divine design in the mid-19th century was shaken by the multiple subversions of Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud. The empirical given-ness of humans, the determinism of the untouchable, sacrosanct human core was gave way to a viability evolutionism, psychoanalysis and The fragility and insecurity of human experience in the form of cultural of civilizational contingency replaced the study of the ‘essence of man’.

The second concerns the rise of the social and human sciences. Anthropology, like many contemporary Western academic sub-disciplines of the social and human sciences, is the child of the scientific *ethos* of the dawn of the 20th century. It grew out of the seemingly contradictory earnest conviction that the study of human beings should build upon an entirely different set of

premises than the natural sciences, but that it nonetheless should bear the epistemological status of *science*. What Wilhelm Dilthey had in 1883 baptised the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) (Dilthey, 1991 [1883]; 1997 [1910]) became the axis of a crisis of all science.

Thus without doing the necessary detail analysis we can at least take note of the fact that anthropology, to the extent it is interested in culture and cultures, is a science of borders, of insides and outsides, of inclusions and exclusions. This is the message of Frederik Barth's classical, *Border and exclusions*. Both in its methodological terms as a historical *Grenzegänger*, and its substance, the science of cultures is the master discourse of identity crisis, of culture-under-threat from the Other without which it would have no meaning, as culture as the experience of threat to culture.

Clarifying concepts II: security

What then of security *per se*? The strange history of *security*, briefer than that of culture is similarly instructive. "No other concept in international relations", observed James Der Derian already in 1995, "packs the metaphysical punch, nor commands the disciplinary power of "security"" (Der Derian, 1995: 24-25)

The notion of security in circulation today is a child of the field of international relations, itself part of a broader political science discipline with own particular historical origins and culturally determined evolution. Before the mid-20th century the term security was never used in connection with international relations issues, or indeed at all in the realm of politics. As late as the end of World War II the concern for security was effectively non-existent in the terms we use today, a mere whisper compared with the overwhelming role it plays today.

In ancient times, the conception of security was primarily bound to the spirit and to spirituality. It was in essence a theological concept. Security was perceived as a disposition, a worldview and a spiritual state in both psychological and moral respects. The Greek word *antaraxie*—peace of mind—was used to describe the state of security.

In the transition to the Middle Ages, *antaraxie* was translated to the Latin *securitas*. In the moral logic of Medieval Christianity, *securitas* it thus acquired a *negative* connotation. Security had a distinctly subjective character, signifying a lack of emotional or spiritual problems, interpreted as lack of concern. Security was a personal issue, which had nothing to do with the state, society or any other groups.

During the Middle Ages the terms *certitudo* and *securitas* went their separate ways. The idea of *certitudo* facilitated the conceptual separation of a more knowledge-oriented branch of security thought from the notion of *securitas*. *Certitudo* means security in knowledge, in thought, in

persuasion. *Securitas* remained an idea of security as an individual. This junction made it possible for the modern conception of security to develop.

Security as *securitas* was merely an objective thought, a thought about the dangers out there—not in here. It becomes liberated from the subjective aspect of threat, danger and risk, from the moral dimension of security, the relationship to God, the cosmos, to other individuals. Security became objectified.

The Feudal period sees the discourse of security transformed into an economic system of goods and services. Security could now be bought and sold. The function of the feudal prince was, in some ways, to offer security to those who could pay for it.

When in 1947 Truman signed the *United States' National Security Act* this suddenly changed. The concept of security was entirely overtaken by the notion of *national security*. As a result of the powerful influence of Cold War ideology, the concept was irresistibly and uncritically passed into circulation in the entire world for 40 years, even though before World War II the term “national security” was virtually unknown. The recognition of a real or imaginary threat against the nation-state during the Cold War contributed to the renaissance of the security concept. Security as a condition without threat, general protection against potential danger, stood in opposition to the notion of defence which represented a strategy with the objective of potential attack.

This concept was further crystallized and institutionalized around the institutionalization of security and strategic studies, understood as national security and strategic studies. When the nuclear threat that was added to the security equation, security studies further hardened into an object for the tools strategic analysis.

The concept of culture in security studies

Culture was not entirely absent from the emergence and evolution of security studies.

It follows well-travelled arguments of the realism-liberalism debate, more recently re-tooled as the realism-constructivism debate. The thrust of the debate hardly needs to be rehearsed: Is it ideational factors or material power that plays the most significant role in explaining “the way the world works”? In its most mainstream form the debate revolves around the “behaviour” of states and the degree to which this where ideas, on the one hand, and interests, on the other have the most consequential “impact” on that behavior.

A first wave this cultural analysis of security feature a host of prominent cultural anthropologists including Geoffrey Bateson, Ruth Benedict, Geoffrey Gorer, Clyde Kluckhohn, Alexander Leighton, and Margaret Mead. The researchers contributed to what might be called “national character” analyses (Desch, 1998: 145). It focused on correlating national culture with the behavior of states

in World War II. Popular versions of the this cultural theory of war played an important role in public discourse in the 1950's (Dower, 1986). To the degree that it made cultural "sense" of national difference, providing a scientific legitimacy for judgment national differences, it played an important role in working through the past, and toward drawing a traumatize world back to its imagined civilization moorings. This cultural movement receded with the rise of the nuclear threat when technology and strategy became the lingua franca of international conflict (Trachtenberg, 1991).

A more recent wave of "culture and security" has taken place with in IR theory, most prominently in 1995-96 in the pages of *International Security*. The positions taken in this debate are by and large attempts to account for the movement toward a general revision of the concept of security that we observe throughout the 1990's. Attempts are made tow widen and broaden "security" and culture seems to be a natural object to include in a broader concept of security. Here "culture" is more or less equated with the idea-side of the equation and evaluated as to whether it plays a role in influencing the power that states operationalize on the playing field of international relations. In his well-turned critical review of 'ideas in Security Studies' Michael C. Desch acknowledges the cultural debate of the 1990's before focusing on four strands of "cultural theorizing" of International Relations in operation today, most of them prolongations of the cultural critique of the 1990's (142-144). These strands are "organizational culture" (Desch, 1998; Kier, 1995; 1996), "political culture", "strategic culture" (Katzenstein, 1996a; Kier, 1995) and "global culture" (Berger, 1996; Tannenwald, 1996). All of these positions essentially surround the Peter Katzensteins 1996 *Culture of National Security*.

Judgments like Desch's of the value of culture in IR rest on a set of criteria of "explanatory power" formed in terms of scientific variation and predictability. How apt, he asks, are theories of culture in explaining the behavior of states. The problems of cultural analysis are, according to Desch, threefold: First, cultural variables are difficult to define and operationalize; second, the claim that culture variables are *sui generis*, thus in effect not variable corrupts there universal validity, and third, cultural theory is not unified, it is rather a movement. Cultural theory is culturalism (150-158). Desch's conclusion, not unexpectedly, is that the "new culturalism" do not provide much explanatory power beyond existing theories (158).

A more directly anthropological turn can be found in the work of other authors such as Colin Dueck, who defines "culture" in this regard as "any set of interlocking values, beliefs and assumptions that are held collectively, by a given group, and passed on through socialization" (Desch, 1998: 200).

The assumption of this experiment is thus that (and we will return to this) material power, interests, the state, and indeed the very notion of 'behaviour', not to mention the entire input-

output logic of this analysis are somehow free from implicit cultural determinations. Culture then is an external force that impacts upon them, bringing discrete consequences.

Thus one critical conclusion from a review of this literature is not that culture “matters” (or doesn’t “matter”) but rather that a central precondition of the debate is a certain exclusion of culture. Security Studies is implicitly or explicitly defined as the instrumentalization of ideas. Culture precedes or is exogenous to this function. Or one might go even farther by suggesting that security studies can be defined as a certain ghettoizing of culture, the function of putting aside or marginalizing. International relations, in this more radical mode has is structured as a annihilation

Epistemology of the unknown

Security, whether we regard it in a long or short, broad or narrow perspective, is a certain ordering of the danger, threat, shelter, well-being, etc. It is a structuring of the relationship between *this* sheltered place, and *that* vulnerable place. It frames the relationship between us and them, between well-being and menace, danger, threat.

Contrary to what the security literature in a variety of forms tells us, security is never simply a *state-of-affairs* or *situation*. Through a kind of dialectical logic, security is the absence of the insecurity, which is nonetheless present by its absence. Security is only possible through the thought of insecurity, through the preparation for what is not yet the case, but rather for what could be the case. All security contains the trace, the thought, of insecurity. And a thought is all it takes to give life to insecurity. Only an absurdly absolute enunciation, “You are secure”, can truly assure security. Any grain of objective reference (“You are secure from the 3000 nuclear warheads in Eastern Europe”) begs the issue. It is the very source of insecurity. Security has far *less* to do with what is *known* than with what is unknown.

Security is increasingly understood and lived as a way of dealing with this unknown, a means of taking action in the face of unknown danger, in face of the unknown as danger itself, and even of danger as the unknown. In this sense security can be construed as a kind of *epistemology*. A kind of system for dealing with knowledge—or rather non-knowledge, that is incomplete or inadequate knowledge—of dangers.

Security is a virtual knowledge, a basis for how to act if adequate knowledge had been present. In this sense it represents a continuation of the classic opposition from the Theory of Just War between prevention (defensive action against demonstrable aggression) and pre-emption (defensive action against likely aggression).

This is of the doctrine to which the Rumsfeld Department of Defense appealed in order to justify the ingress into the Iraq conflict. Many documents of this strategic episode remain. One of them

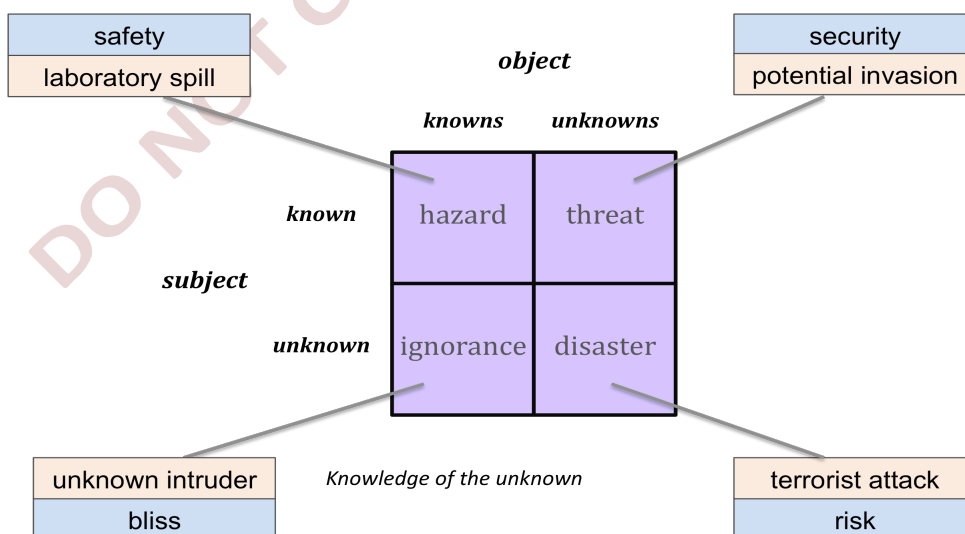
has remained more famous than others. With the editorial help of political commentator Hart Seely it has been transformed into a poem: “The Unknown”.

The Unknown

As we know,
 There are known knowns.
 There are things we know we know.
 We also know
 There are known unknowns.
 That is to say
 We know there are some things
 We do not know.
 But there are also unknown unknowns,
 The ones we don't know
 We don't know.

Donald Rumsfeld at a press conference of the Department of Defence, 12. February 2002 (Seely, 2003).

As uncommon as the rhetorical form may be, it should not be taken as tongue-in-cheek.



Uncertainty and the rise of the discourse of risk

As we can see security exploits a number of different alliances with *knowledge* (Dillon, 1996: 17). This is its culture. Security is a kind of knowledge, and yet insecurity does not adequately break down within the scope of the epistemology of security studies or international relations. This is because security knowledge is the axis of production of number of pathologies of insecurity, in other words, a number of ways that insecurity is lived by us (Dillon, 1996). The search for security generates a self-replicating need for security and thereby for knowledge in the aim security.

We cannot be secure in our knowledge unless it is total and global. More knowledge brings with it knowledge of the limits of knowledge which in turn produces more insecurity. The more transparent we render our lives in the name of security, the more border controls, bag-checks and metal detectors we confront, the less secure we *feel*, and pragmatically, the less secure society is in pragmatic turns.

What seems clear from the analysis so far is that the *experience* of security and insecurity has outgrown and the *concept* of security. There is a misfit between concept and experience. This misfit can be linked to the rise in the concept of *risk*. Current security thinking, already a kind of mutant from the more or less defunct concept of *strategy* seems to be morphing again in conjunction with the rise of the concept of *risk*.

This extraordinary hybrid concept, risk—in its most current usage—plots a complex constellation of empirical facts, ideas, and values. It is hub between past, present and future. And, as an analytic concept, it links three entirely different epistemologies. As a filter and interpreter of the *past*, it applies a *historiographical* logic, mobilizing the hermeneutical activity that contribute to rendering the past present as a basis for making judgments about the future. As a criterion for assembling facts about the *present* in view of prognosis about the future, it mobilizes social scientific principles touching upon questions of scope and depth, salience, operationalizability, etc. Finally, as a future-oriented, prognostic concept it links assessments of likelihood and relevance with judgments of socially, politically, culturally based value.

Risk in this sense is the new culture of security. What can this mean?

Risk reflects our experience of the past, our perception of the present, and our aspirations for the future. It draws upon our own individual experience as well as the experience of others. It reflects what we know and necessarily delves into the unknown. It paradoxically conceptualizes the certainty of uncertainty at the very frontier between faith and reason. In this sense, risk is profoundly involved in the metaphysics of the unknown, in concern for the other-worldly.

Moreover, risk is inseparable from a certain question of power, of mastery and submission. The sciences of risk, from the frivolousness of the pre-modern science, to the challenge of probability and statistical uncertainty, to the new sciences of risk management, all conceptualize risk as something to tame but not to eliminate. Indeed, risk is the very backbone of the financial system that today faces such great challenges. Risk is in this sense an indispensable component of capitalism.

Through its brief but rapid evolution, risk analysis has stood firmly on the shoulders of scientific knowledge, and the rapid evolution in risk studies has been driven by advances in science, technology and not the least actuarial sciences. The dependency of risk studies on science and technology is both odd and disquieting. For the epistemology of the natural sciences, its *alpha* and *omega*, is the bounded field of the known or the immediately to-be-known. Risk is directly defined out of this field. Risk concerns precisely what we do not know. As soon as the unknown becomes known it ceases to be risk.

Political scientists are notoriously poor prophets. This is both their virtue and a reminder that political science is not organized by an epistemology of the natural sciences. It is odd then, and symptomatic of the state of our scientific—and risk—culture, that we turn in reflex to the means and methods of the sciences, preferably the natural sciences, to analyze risk, to cast light upon what we not only actually do not know, as it happens, but more importantly upon what-we-do-not-know as such, upon the unknowable itself, upon necessary, structural, imminent unknowability.

What does the culture of science, supported by its norms and values, claim to know about this? Well, *nothing*, to begin with. Still, we can hardly reproach scientists for knowing nothing about the unknown. This is only tautological self-evidence. And to the scientists credit, knowing nothing is not as the same as knowing nothing about nothing. Far from it. In the scientific canon the ordinary dialectical logic of knowledge ensures that the unknown remains discretely inscribed in the field of the known. The unknown is in this sense not *radically* unknown, but rather something to-be-known, something that we know we will know once the ordinary processes of scientific assessment are applied. It is like flotsam scavenged from a beach, lying on the examination table awaiting identification: no, we don't exactly know what it is, but we are not in doubt that we will find out. All that stands between us and the knowledge is known process or method. This is (known as) the "known unknown". This is the situation that makes any natural scientist itch in the fingers. The task consist not in "discovery" in any strong sense, but rather of the controlled combinatorics of known facts, tested methods and lived experiences.

By contrast, were the object radically unknown, we would be unable to establish its object-ness, we would not even see it on the examination table, because we would be unaware of which

properties establish its it-ness. The structural hubris involved in scientific enquiry is that we believe that the finality of the scientific enterprise is to transform, more or less without epistemological residue, the unknown into the known. The “nothing” that the risk researcher knows about the future is, in the eyes of science-as-usual only a temporary condition. One might even be tempted to characterize it, in with Hegel, as “bad” knowledge—faulty, defected or flawed—if not for the fact that such artificial unknowns, as Thomas Kuhn argued decades ago, weren’t the artificial support and guarantee of the existence of scientific institutions writ large (Kuhn). The deferral of knowledge in knowledge of the pleasure it will inevitable bring, the pleasure not being in the discovery but rather in the deferral, corresponds to what Freud called the “pleasure principle”. Based upon his observations of the “fort-da” (here-there) game of young children. The child “hides” an object in order to take pleasure from its “discovery” . What is at issue is that science is ill-equipped for not-knowing. It has no tradition for bring not-knowing, non-knowledge as something, or perhaps something less, than overcoming ignorance (through science) into the field of understandable, the useable, and the objective.

The epistemology of security today concerns knowledge that will never be knowledge. For knowledge (or rather ignorance) is the very theoretical variable of risk. Once the danger or threat that is set out by risk is known, its valence changes, its cultural reference rotates and it ceases to be risk, it is transformed into knowledge of real existing danger, no longer merely likely or probable, but imminent.

To better understand this shift in discourse, we need a re-focus of analysis to the human aspects, to culture, to the value side, and to the ethical dimensions of risk assessment. On my view the fundamental, and fundamentally neglected, characteristic of risk is its *ethos*. By the *ethos* of risk I mean its function as a meeting place for the expression, incorporation and negotiation of human values.

The culture of security begins not with knowledge, but where knowledge ends. When insurance companies carry out assessments based on statistic profiles, likelihoods and probably backgrounds, they are already eliminating the risk, not because the car will not crash, the chain-smoker won’t contract emphysema but rather because the *value* of the danger, should it obtain, is henceforth reduced to zero. In the sense of determining the way it will affect human lives, the consequences have already taken place, the accident has already happened, (human) value assessments are already made, actions are already taken, etc.

The portion of risk that is not assimilatable to the value calculus of risk analysis is what we might call *radical* risk. It is the unknown unknown. It is the part that *counts* in our lives, precisely because it *doesn’t count* in the scientific calculus. It cannot be reduced to nil through analysis and planning. It cannot be pulverized. This indestructible radical risk is important precisely *because* it

is unforeseeable *and* precisely it is this “eventuality” which forms the only available basis for judging how we should lead our lives. Radical risk is therefore the site of a *decision* about what we value in human terms, and therefore it is a decision about our own identity, about who we are and what we want, what is dispensable and what is indispensable.

Conclusion: Security culture

The discourse of risk teaches us that knowledge is security and the security is therefore laden with human, cultural values. Culture is the subject’s experience of itself as contingent, and therefore as vulnerable, fragile. “Each of us is constituted politically”, says Judith Butler, “in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure (Burgess, 2007; Butler, 2004).

Security and insecurity are implicitly connected to the individual and to human values. Security is an expression of a certain philosophy of life. It expresses a certain perspective on life, of individual and collective anxieties and aspirations, of expectations about what to sacrifice and what is worth preserving. Security is also a reflection of what we are willing to sacrifice, of what we are willing to fight or even die for. In other words, security is a social, cultural and, finally, ethical concept.

Security is often associated with the material aspects of life because, in our time, they have a tendency to incorporate, if not replace, human values. But these technical and material values should not be confused with life itself. Security does not involve only *things*. It involves *people* who value things and who need certain things as a means to survive.

Solid, thorough and effective security research and measures must therefore take into account the social and cultural forces that shape our understanding of what security and insecurity mean, what threatens the things we value most, and what should determine our response to crisis or catastrophe.

This is the thought with which I would like to leave you. Security is in the end reflexive. Security is as much about those who live the threat as it is about the threat itself.

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